Yenangyaung oilfields, support of Ministers, and the indifference of the less worthy sections of University staff and students towards the nationalist movement. 873 668

The crowning event of my years there was the great strike of 1936 when about 600 students got into buses just before the final examinations and encamped themselves on the slopes of the Shwe Dagon Pagoda hill, with much sympathy and material support from the public, the men returning every morning to picket the black-leg examination candidates by lying across all exits and entrances—a completely successful technique, for it is an unthinkable insult to a Buddhist male to have his body trodden on, and no Burman, or Burma Indian or Chinese for that matter, will dare to inflict such an insult. Some of the strikers felt, after the rallying speeches in the Union, that they were striking to evict an immoral member of the staff who had the support of the Principal whom they considered an autocrat; others knew that definite demands had been put forward for the amendment of the University Act, the ultimate result of which would be to make this Principal more accountable to Burmese political leaders; a great majority felt a wave of unnameable exaltation as they stormed hall after hall for recruits, ringing bells and shouting, "Come on, sisters, the day of freedom has arrived at last!" and almost all banged and cheered as they drove away, on the roofs, the steps and the wheels of the buses, at the thought of no examinations that year, and the exciting days of picketing ahead. But it was a tragic and unhappy time for some who did not have money to waste on another year before graduation and who trusted that the authorities would succeed in holding the examinations, or for others who did not join out of personal loyalties of the moment and who had friends and brothers with impassioned convictions on the other side. I shall always remember the face of my friend Ko Ohn, as he refused to let a doctor into Inya Hall to attend to a sick non-striker, his good face so full of distress and his longyi all smudged with the melted tarmac of the road in which he had been lying under the hot March sun. "Please, we must do it," he said; "I am so thirsty and my head is aching, but we must do it for our country." [577]

One of the reasons for the focussing of public interest on the University students was the great interest taken in the development of the young women there. The male students, like the public, were not interested in them only for reasons of courtship or companionship, but took a keen objective interest in them. It has been said of Burma that she has no feminist movements because none have been necessary; the women have always had all the rights they wanted. But it goes further than that. Burmese men take a sincere pride in the achievements of a woman who can successfully invade spheres outside her domestic tasks. 873 562 179

1: Mi Mi Khaing I-5 (no date) 1946 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4
Indians
Europeans

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

AFTER a stay of three years in England, I set out on a return journey home with a band of friends and compatriots. This was in August 1940, and the long sea voyage round the Cape gave us time for all the thoughts which filled our minds at the prospect of seeing Burma again after three and four years abroad. Besides our excitement at the approach of family reunions and the delights of once again eating Burmese food, we wondered whether the events in the outside world during the past few years, and the outbreak of the European war, had filled our people with interest, excitement or alarm for international events. 175

Before I left Burma I had been a student among companions who had only a passing interest in affairs outside Burma, so filled had our minds been with separation from India in 1936, the general elections for the first House of Representatives in Burma's history, the formation of the first Ministry under Dr. Ba Maw, student strikes for the amendment of the University Act, and the fervid chastising campaigns on the part of monks and fanatic students for the wearing of thick homespun by women instead of the scandalously transparent imported muslins. The older people at home also turned their eyes along the same channels. Of Hitler and Mussolini our aunts had heard, as of caricatured figures on a distant screen, and Ba Maw's admiration of Hitler's position of power was obscured by his eccentric passion for gorgeous attire, which was much more in the public eye. 175 668

The letters which I received from friends in Burma during my three years in England had also been too full of the Indian-Burman riots which raged violently in 1938, the industrial strikes in the oilfields, and the repeated school and university strikes which added to the general domestic unrest of those years, to tell me much else. But since then we had read of the opening of the Burma Road as an event of world interest; later we had read with feelings of surprise, amusement and expectancy of the face-slapping, debagging and stuffing of passports into the mouth to which the Japanese had subjected Englishmen in the ports of China, as something new and startling in our time; and later still, the closing of the Burma Road at the insistence of the Japanese Government made us suddenly connect the European politics which so excited our English friends with the events in places which surrounded Burma, though not 175 578 563

16:Fielding Hall G-3 (1885-1890) 1898 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

ness. Can there be a more valuable knowledge for anyone than this?

In many ways she will act for her husband with vigour and address, and she is not afraid of appearing in his name or her own in law courts, for instance, or in transacting certain kinds of business. She knows that she can do certain business as well as or better than her husband, and she does it. There is nothing more remarkable than the way in which she makes a division of these matters in which she can act for herself, and those in which, if she act at all, it is for her husband.

Thus, as I have said, she will, as regards her own property or her own business, act freely in her own name, and will also frequently act for her husband too. They will both sign deeds, borrow money on joint security, lend money repayable to them jointly. But in public affairs she will never allow her name to appear at all. Not that she does not take a keen interest in such things. She lives in no world apart; all that affects her husband interests her as keenly as it does him. She lives in a world of men and women, and her knowledge of public affairs, and her desire and powers of influencing them, is great. But she learnt long ago that her best way is to act through and by her husband, and that his strength and his name are her bucklers in the fight. Thus women are never openly concerned in any political matters. How strong their feeling is can better be illustrated by a story than in any other way.

In 1889 I was stationed far away on the north-west frontier of Burma, in charge of some four thousand square miles of territory which had been

16:Fielding Hall G-3 (1885-1890) 1898 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

newly incorporated. I went up there with the first column that ever penetrated that country, and I remained there when, after the partial pacification of the district, the main body of the troops were withdrawn. It was a fairly exciting place to live in. To say nothing of the fever which swept down men in batches, and the trans-frontier people who were always peeping over to watch a good opportunity for a raid, my own charge simply swarmed with armed men, who seemed to rise out of the very ground—so hard was it to follow their movements —attack anywhere they saw fit, and disappear as suddenly. There was, of course, a considerable force of troops and police to suppress these insurgents, but the whole country was so roadless, so unexplored, such a tangled labyrinth of hill and forest, dotted with sparse villages, that it was often quite impossible to trace the bands who committed these attacks; and to the sick and weary pursuers it sometimes seemed as if we should never restore peace to the country.

The villages were arranged in groups, and over each group there was a headman with certain powers and certain duties, the principal of the latter being to keep his people quiet, and, if possible, protect them from insurgents.

Now, it happened that among these headmen was one named Saw Ka, who had been a free-lance in his day, but whose services were now enlisted on the side of order—or, at least, we hoped so. He was a fighting-man, and rather fond of that sort of exercise; so that I was not much surprised one day when I got a letter from him to say that his villagers

21: Htin Aung E-5 (ca. 1930) 1937 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

536 *
178

became the patron of U Pon Nya, rebelled successfully against his brother Pagan, and there came into being a promise of better times. He built a new capital, Mandalay, with wide streets and pleasant squares, and his wisdom and statesmanship won him the love of his people and the respect of the British. There was again an understanding between the court and the people, and the court became once more the centre of learning, after the lapse of some fifty years. Treaties of friendship between Burma and Britain and the personal affection the king had for Queen Victoria seemed to assure lasting peace to the country.[1] Dreams of a mighty empire, reflected in the heroic interludes, and to some extent in U Kyin U, were abandoned for ever. Peace and contentment were the keynote of the period, and there entered the drama, restored to the forefront by U Pon Nya, an atmosphere of calm, as opposed to that of strife in U Kyin U. Even in *Wizaya* that calmness prevailed. The epoch ended with the execution of U Pon Nya and the rebellion of Myingun, which caused the death of the heir to the throne, the ablest soldiers, the wisest statesmen, and the most learned scholars of the day, leaving the king alone to rule a country wrapped in gloom and a people torn into different factions over the pressing and difficult problem of succession.

536 *
668 ●
208
175

U Pon Nya followed U Kyin U in expressing political opinions in his plays, but he went further and used the drama as a political weapon. In *Paduma* he attacked those ladies of the court who had not shown enough respect or patronage to him, and he was so successful that he became a power in the land. The king, the crown prince, and the chief queen realized this, and they used *The Water-seller* to announce to the people, who were secretly getting ready for a civil war, that the threatened rupture between the brothers, king and prince, happily, would not materialize. Even after its author's death, the play was once specially performed at court, to test opinion with regard to the king's plan to appoint an able prince, who was far removed from the line of succession, as heir to the throne. In the middle of the performance, a senior prince said: 'If father wants to

[1] One of the most prized possessions of King Mindon was a gold watch which Queen Victoria had presented him, and which he always wore. During the Indian Mutiny, in spite of temptation, he remained friendly and even sent help to the British, saying that he would never 'strike a friend in trouble'. Cf. G. E. Harvey, *History of Burma*, school edition: the ordinary edition gives the history up to 1824 only.

21: Htin Aung E-5 (ca. 1930) 1937 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

536*
208
668
175

appoint a lowly prince as crown prince, there will be no objection on our part. But it does not mean that he will become king for, look at *The Water-seller*.' The project was consequently abandoned. This incident illustrates the power of the drama in the politics of the time. *Kawthala* was probably meant to convey to a small section of the people who were against treating with the British and wanting revenge the doctrine that destiny, a worthy foe, and the interests of a country would act against any personal motive of revenge. *Wizaya* was written to win over supporters for Prince Myingun. He had been wild and troublesome as the youthful Wizaya, and the suggestion was that Myingun would bring greatness to Burma if he were but entrusted with the throne. Also, as Myingun had the project of killing both his father and father-in-law, the crown prince, the play was probably meant to spread the doctrine that the destined greatness of a country called for, and justified, sacrifices. The play was so popular that probably Myingun thought wrongly that public opinion had been moulded to give him support when he rebelled. The rebellion failed, and U Pon Nya lost his life, chiefly through the very play which most Burmese critics acclaim as his masterpiece.

21: Hla Aung E-6 (ca. 1930) 1937 AP1 Burma

Burmese AP4
Upper Burma
Lower Burma

So for about a decade after the death of U Pon Nya, the drama decayed and was left entirely in the hands of actors. And in Upper Burma, the real home of the drama, it never recovered from their influence. True, some scholars in the quiet of a monastery wrote many a play, retelling a religious story, but their plays were never meant to be presented on the stage, nor did they follow the established dramatic traditions. They were merely scholarly exercises, and though many contained masterly prose and poetry, they did not really belong to the true drama, for they were plays only in name.[1] In Lower Burma, however, scholars again assumed control of the drama, though they had to comply with the desires of the actors in many matters. The change in the venue of Burmese drama is significant. Rangoon, the capital of British Burma, and not Mandalay, the national capital, was now the centre of dramatic development. The reasons for the change were many. The court was the centre of political intrigues and the drama could no longer look to it for development. Upper Burma was in a hopeless condition, and it never recovered until some years after the completion of the British conquest in 1886. In Lower Burma, on the other hand, by about 1875, the benefits of a developed commerce were seen, and after a few years of transition, prosperity was returning. There was peace and stability of government. The spirit of the people in Lower Burma was no longer of anxiety and despair. But it was not one of great serenity, for they realized that Upper Burma would soon fall into British hands, and the Burmese would never again have a kingdom of their own. There was intense regret, and the Burmese Crown, from which the past greatness of the nation had flowed, came to be looked upon with great sentimentality. True, the court in Upper Burma was in a disgraceful condition, especially since the death of Mindon and the accession of his son, Theebaw (1875–86), but that very deterioration, by contrast, enhanced the sentimental respect for the past glories of the throne. The drama therefore was used to present scenes of great splendour, in which court manners and customs were shown to an audience who, having come under an alien rule since 1824, knew their national court only from hearsay. That was why sentimentality and spectacle continued to dominate the drama, even though conditions had improved enough

[1] Some plays of this type, printed in Lower Burma, are preserved in the British Museum, e.g. *Thuyeme-thone* and *Maha Zemeka*, both by *tsaraw* and founded on U Awbatha's *Jatakas* of the same names. Many of these plays are still obtainable in Burma.

536*
178
101
668
178
536*
[114]

21: Htin Aung E-5 (ca. 1930) 1937 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

668 178 536* [213] [171] for scholars to rehandle it. The introduction of cheap printing in Lower Burma was of the utmost importance to the drama. Printing had been known to the Burmese long before the British administered Lower Burma, but it was an expensive and laborious affair. The British introduced cheap and efficient printing presses, worked by cheap but skilled Indian labour. Once the stage of transition had been completed and economic prosperity had returned, printing spread all over Lower Burma and widened the circle of admirers of the drama, encouraged the study of the great plays in their original form as distinct from the modified versions of the professional actors, and created a public eager not only to see but also to read plays. As a result of these various causes scholars began writing plays again after 1875, but their efforts were not very successful until Saya Yaw in 1877 wrote and produced his *History of Thaton*.

2. *The History of Thaton*

536* Saya Yaw's story is remarkably original. In order that the question of succession should be settled beforehand, the young king of Thaton is advised by his ministers to take a consort without delay, and he promises to consider the matter. In the next scene, a brother and sister, belonging to a semi-civilized tribe on a neighbouring mountain, are entering the city to seek employment, for they have been starving since the death of their parents. The scene shifts to the centre of the city, where a rich nobleman and his wife are quarrelling and blaming each other, because they have no children to inherit their wealth. The characters are comic, and the scene is humorous. As they stand shouting at each other, the brother and sister pass by, and they are struck by the girl's beauty and the young man's nobility of bearing. When they discover that the strangers are without parents and are looking for employment, they, in great [563] joy, adopt them as son and daughter. In the next scene, merchants from the Shan hills arrive at the city, singing and dancing their own songs and dances. They soon dispose of their wares, and they are making preparations to leave when the brother arrives. He becomes friendly with the merchants, and after listening to their tales of romance and adventure in their hills, he decides to accompany them to their home. He asks permission to go from his foster-parents and his sister, who reluctantly let him go. The foster-parents cry, and the brother and sister bid farewell to each other in songs of great tenderness. In the next scene, the chieftain of a Shan state is sorely

21: Htin Aung E-5 (ca. 1930) 1937 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

could not and did not achieve success, even though the translator was the learned scholar and journalist, U Shwe Kyu.[1] The translations went unnoticed, and as the magazine became defunct in 1913, the precious issues which contain them are now available only in some libraries. After this failure to introduce Shakespeare into the vernacular, no further attempt was made, and Burmese is one of the very few civilized languages into which the plays of the great dramatist have not been successfully translated.

In 1919, after the Great War, a wave of national aspiration swept over Asia, and Burma was affected by it. With the resulting revival of interest in Burmese institutions, the study of U Kyin U and U Pon Nya has become again popular, not only in schools and colleges, but all over the country. In schools following the established educational practice of prescribing Shakespeare's plays as textbooks, the plays of U Kyin U and U Pon Nya are now so prescribed. The newly established Rangoon University, founded by the Government in 1920, the Burma Research Society[2] and the Burma Book Club—institutions founded by the British Government and University officials interested in Burmese history and literature, encouraged and led to the study of Burmese literature, including the drama, side by side with the English. And when adaptations in Burmese of a play by Molière and another by Tchekov appeared in 1928 in the magazine of the Book Club,[3] there were hopes that a new drama was in course of being developed. But the study has been from the beginning independent of, and unconnected with, the theatre of the professional actors, who are in great demand and still popular with the majority of the people. Therefore the interest in the drama, even though spread beyond the university walls, remains academic rather than practical. And as far as I can see, there are no signs of the coming in the near future of a new national drama.

[1] The magazine in which the translation appeared was the *Shwe Kyu Magazine*, and U Shwe Kyu was its founder and editor.

[2] The Text Publication Committee of the Research Society has published U Kyin U's *Dayagonbon* and *Parpaheik* with editorial notes, contributing much to our knowledge of the dramatist.

[3] The adaptations were from English translations of the two plays. English is the only medium of contact with the western drama for the Burmese, and, as in India, the influence of other European literatures can come only through English channels.